

CANINES WITH CAREERS: SAVING DOGS, IMPROVING LIVES

THE NEED

Canines with Careers seeks to save dogs that would otherwise be killed in shelters by identifying those that could be trained to meet the tremendous unmet need for service and other support dogs in the U.S. The number of dogs that can be saved is commensurate with the number of people in this country currently on waiting lists for or identified as being able to benefit from a service dog. Over 40 million people in the U.S. have a mental or physical disability, and only about 1 percent have service or support dogs.

The current study of Canines with Careers is focused on veterans who have Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and have adopted service dogs. The Department of Defense estimates that 20-30 percent of the 2 million men and women deployed since 2001 will suffer from PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), or other psychiatric disorders such as depression. This equates to **400,000-600,000 veterans** who could potentially benefit from a service dog.

A review of statistics from the highest profile and best established service dog training programs (e.g., Puppies Behind Bars, Paws for Purple Hearts, NEADS) shows that, on average, programs place 10-15 dogs per year. As a result of the small number of dogs placed each year, there is a tremendous unmet need for service dogs.

A NEW MODEL

To date, most organizations offering service dogs have relied on purebred puppies that are raised, trained, and placed at 18-24 months old. The drawbacks of this model include:

- Significant time for the dog to mature and be trained,
- A high failure rate (general consensus is that over 50 percent of purebred dogs turn out to be inappropriate for service work once they reach adulthood),
- Very high costs (\$10,000 to \$40,000 per dog), and
- Long waiting lists (average wait time is 1-2 years).

Canines with Careers, which involves thorough assessment and training of *shelter and rescue* dogs, represents an alternative to the traditional model of training service dogs. Given the level of unmet need for service dogs, there is potential for: (1) thousands of rescue dogs to be saved, and (2) thousands of people to be helped more quickly and economically. As a result, new partnerships will be forged among constituencies that might otherwise never have an interest in supporting efforts to find forever homes for rescue dogs.

By tracking the implementation of the Canines with Careers program model and demonstrating success, we hope to fundamentally change the service dog field by providing a compassionate and cost-effective alternative to the standard practice of relying on purebred puppies.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

To date I have conducted 22 interviews with veterans and others who have PTSD and have adopted service and support dogs. Respondents have received dogs from seven nonprofits located in six different states (AZ, UT, WI, IL, MS, NV). Interviews last approximately 45 minutes and include questions about why the respondent decided to adopt a dog, how the dog helps him or her, the types of training received, the reaction of family and friends to the dog, and how life is different since adopting the dog.

Specific tasks dogs have helped their people with include waking them from nightmares, checking rooms before they enter, reminding them to take needed medication, and calming them during panic or anxiety attacks, among others. Every respondent has described in detail the profound effect the dog has had on him or her.

Preliminary themes that have emerged across respondents include:

- A renewed sense of purpose in life

So I wouldn't be the same person without him. I know that for a fact. It was because of him that I'm doing King's Second Chance [starting a nonprofit to provide service dogs to veterans who have PTSD].

How would my life be different? We wouldn't be here sitting in the park right now. Even though it's a Sunday I would probably be staring at a wall thinking about what's going to happen. Not even thinking about what's going to happen because I wouldn't have been thinking about what's going to happen in a month from now. I would just be there staring at a wall again. I wouldn't go outside I wouldn't have the interaction. I would still be really stressed out with depression and anxiety and...I don't even want to think about not being able to have my dog because I've been there and it's not good. Having my dog has been a very big change for the positive.

He makes me have responsibility. And that's the key aspect of where I'm at in my life since I can't find a job. I really don't have the skills to interview. I have interviewing problems. I get nervous and I have anxiety and I shut down. It's hard for me to take that extra step. I guess I'm afraid of rejection in a way. But he [my dog] won't reject me. Ever.

- An increased sense of social support and an expanded network of social connections - This is particularly important as respondents universally described intense social isolation before getting the dog

She senses my emotions and I sense her emotions...if she could talk we would talk endlessly...you know me and her would talk forever. The best thing is having a friend that I know has my back 100 percent....and I have hers, too. She relies on me.

Well he has filled a void in my life.....He's a dog but he's more like a partner. So when it comes time for me needing something or having to do something...he looks up at me like don't worry, it's okay we can do this.

People wouldn't normally come up to me and talk to me without him. I don't know why. And I don't really want to speculate why. People just generally.... kind of stay away from me. There's no real rhyme or reason, that's just the way it works out. [But recently...] I was sitting down by myself [at an outdoor event]. [My dog] was sitting with me, and a couple sits down next to me with a little girl. We start talking and they said the little girl was scared of large dogs because she'd been attacked by a Husky. She had scars on her face, and I felt really bad for her. I said listen hon I'll make you a promise. If you want to pet [my dog], he'll love you to death. She came over and petted him, and [my dog] licked her in the face. The mother started crying. And the mom.... walked across the street and came back with a hamburger and a cup of water for [my dog]. So he brings a lot of people around.

I'm a lot more independent now. You know when I first got put in the wheelchair, I thought this is it. Life is over. I can never go anywhere and have fun, but with Emmitt, I go anyplace. We have shuttles at the apartment complex where I live now. It's a 55 and over senior complex plus a disabled complex, and they have activities all the time. I would never go to the activities at G— [previous residence] because I was scared, but now I'm getting out because of [my dog] and going places. The last two months that I lived in G—, I had black sheets on my windows and I didn't come out for even the meal they prepared for us every day. I stayed in my little studio apartment there. I didn't participate in anything because of fear.

It's safety so you don't stay home in isolation all the time. It's something that we're prone to doing. I do an inordinate amount of that. I shouldn't, but I will take her to get her out and take her places just to get myself out of the house.

- Improved relationships with family and friends (e.g., ability to engage in recreational activities with children, go out in public with a spouse; one respondent described going to the movies for the first time in 5 years with her children, two of whom she'd never been able to share that experience with before)

It's really hard to explain how she has basically changed me from this scared person who wouldn't even leave the house and had her husband make phone calls for her because she was...I was so afraid to even talk to people. And going to the grocery store and leaving a cart full of food because I had a panic attack. And everything was put on my husband – doing the grocery shopping, dropping the kids off, picking them up from school. It was horrible. I felt like a big burden to my husband and now I have [my dog] and she has taken so much off of his shoulders.

It's a lot better experience than what I thought. It's like okay you have a dog and you can go places, but it's that she's there...She's just there all the time. And I know she's

not going to be there forever and ever but I can count on her to be right there by my side if I'm going to have a panic attack. I can get out with my kids. I can do stuff with my husband. I can enjoy life once again.

[My dog] is like an additional drug that got added that keeps me calmer and has allowed me to go out in public more. Where normally I just didn't like being out...Now I can do things like just going to the store, going with my wife. Before she'd go by herself, but now I accompany her.

- A sense of security, both in terms of being safe *from* others and feeling more secure about the ability to control aggressive actions *toward* others

Yeah there is a safety thing about having the dog with you. They tend to keep you grounded. And if people come up to you – and they will because of the dog – they provide a barrier. They keep the 3-foot limit in effect. They keep people from coming too close. It is astounding to me how many people come up to me that normally would not come up to me.

I go to some places and I see a group of people and I avoid it not because I'm afraid of the people. I'm afraid of my actions toward the group of people. You know that's why I stay at home and in general avoid large groups of people. You know because I don't know what I can do and I don't want to put myself in the situation, but with my dog it seems like only good people approach when you have a dog. And we start a conversation and that's a positive to me because now I'm connecting...being outside, being in the fresh air with my dog. People are going to approach me and it's not going to be a negative.

- Motivation to make a better life for oneself in order to give the dog a better life (e.g., buy a bigger car or a house with a yard)

That's my car over there...and I wish we had a bigger car because we want to take her everywhere and that's kind of like why we're moving too...We're saving up for a bigger car because being able to have her with me is.... It's helpful to me.

We want to get a bigger place to move to. We want to upgrade our lifestyle so that his life can be better. I mean he's a dog, but I treat him just like a human. I wanted to get him a birthday cake for his birthday. You know when he does a really good job I want to be able to do nice things for him. He deserves it.

- A desire to give back (e.g., helping others get a career dog, training their dog to be a therapy dog, advocating for policies that would support career dogs, sharing their stories)

[From a veteran who said he could not get a job because his anxiety prevented him from completing job interviews. I commented on how eloquent he had been during our conversation.] I came here knowing what I wanted to talk about so I mean it's

definitely important for me to get the story out, or at least my story. I mean nobody is going to be the same and I just want to be honest because I know what I'm telling you is going to help out other people...maybe not my generation but maybe the next generation 20 years down the road.

I'm just being more open and honest, and I think [my dog] is helping me do that – to just be more like who I am because I think I can be comfortable. Like I have her there as a back up kind of safety net. I can be more comfortable and so I'm sharing my story. I'm sharing who I am. And so the second question [What is your dog trained to do to mitigate your disability?], sometimes I'm awkward but sometimes I'm just like this is who I am and there's all different kinds of people out there and I have a service dog. I don't mind people seeing that I'm a stylist and I look fine, but I have service dog. I'm just trying to show people that you can look all different ways and have different needs.

I think I'm going to become a big advocate for service animals and for people who have them. I want to advocate for different ways to help. I think there should be a decal on vehicles showing there's a service animal so if something happens they're going to look for the animal, too. And they'll know not to separate us if say I'm in an accident because the first thing I'm going to be asking is – Where's my dog?

A Final (Personal) Note

For the past 20 years, I have been doing research on programs designed to help people, like the veterans in this study, who have experienced trauma. In all of those years, in hundreds and hundreds of interviews, I have never – **not once** – heard anyone talk about love or how it helped them heal. In the first 14 interviews I transcribed, the word love appears 57 times – 57. And almost every one of those respondents said that the best thing about having their dog was love. If you take only one thing away from this study, I hope it will be that you never underestimate the profoundly healing power of the relationship between a hurting person and their dog – the power of love.